

Kishore Mahbubani: The West will use India to contain China's rise

Kishore Mahbubani / January 16, 2011, 0:25 IST

The West did not dominate the world through stupidity. It is capable of geopolitically brilliant moves. Therefore, the West will certainly look for alternative instruments to use against China. Let me suggest two it will try. The first is to focus on the obvious Achilles' heel of China: its political system. The most powerful ideological instrument to use in any struggle is the instrument of legitimacy. In one way or another, the West will try to delegitimize the Chinese political system, especially by highlighting its lack of democracy. In so doing, the West will deliberately ignore the fact that Chinese society has never been as open as it is today. Hence, when the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to a dissident like Liu Xiaobao instead of one of the greatest leaders of the 20th Century, Deng Xiaoping, it is natural for the Chinese government to get angry because they see it, with some reason, as a Western plan to delegitimize the political system of China. Please let me emphasize one point: I presume that it is clear that it is not in India's interest to join the West in trying to de-legitimize the Chinese political system, tempting as it may be.

The second instrument that the West can try to use against China is divide-and-rule. Indeed, this is how the West conquered the world. One reason why I published my first book, "Can Asians Think?" was to answer an obvious question: how did 100,000 Englishmen rule so effectively over 300 million Indians. One obvious reason: divide-and-rule. This time around the West cannot use radical Islam to unhinge China. However, it will look all around Asia for instruments to use to either balance or destabilize China: from Japan to South Korea; from Taiwan to Tibet; from ASEAN to India. Each of these instruments provides geo-political opportunities for the West. However, the ideal geopolitical instrument will be India.

Why India? The simplest answer is that from year 1 to year 1820, the two largest economies were China and India. However, with the passing of the era of Western domination of world history, there will be an almost natural return of China and India to the number one and number two slots in Global GNP ranking. From the point of view of Western geopolitical interests, with China and India returning as the number one and number two non-Western powers in the world, what better geopolitical scenario could there be for the West than for the number one and number two to struggle against each other as they are rising? And if they both succeed in slowing down the rise of each other, won't the prime beneficiary of this be the West?

The third and final question is this: is it in India's interest to join the West in thwarting the rise of China? I presume that the answer is no. There is a simple rule of geo-politics. In any three-way contest of power, the best position to occupy is the middle-position.

In geopolitics, it is a mistake to allow emotions to determine when to get aggravated. Getting aggravated should be a rational choice, not an emotional choice. Thirty years ago, most would have predicted that the China-Taiwan problem was far more difficult to solve than the India-Pakistan problem. Today, the reverse is probably true. The lesson from all this is that it is a mistake to allow emotions to influence geopolitical decisions. Reason must always trump emotion.

This is why the best strategy for India to emulate in trying to rise and emerge peacefully is to follow Deng Xiaoping's advice for China, namely: (1) *lengjing guan*—observe and analyze [developments] calmly; (2) *chenzhuo yingfu*—deal [with changes] patiently and confidently; (3) *wenzhu zhenjiao*—secure [our own] position; (4) *taoguang yanghui*—conceal [our] capabilities and avoid the limelight; (5) *shanyu shouzhuo*—be good at keeping a low profile; (6) *juebu dangtou*—never become a leader; (7) *yousuo zuowei*—strive to make achievements. If India were to practice this advice, enormous geopolitical opportunities would open for India. I realise that this is difficult advice for a country with a boisterous free media which works on 24 hour

news cycles and requires instant sound bites. Yet, at the same time, most of the Indian journalists I have met have also tended to be very thoughtful and conscious of India's long-term interests. Most Indian journalists, I believe, would also agree that India is better off pursuing an independent policy rather than one that serves the interests of others.

Excerpt from a lecture by Kishore Mahbubani, dean, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, in New Delhi, January 8